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ABSTRACT

A study was done of college student cognitive satisfactions and perceived assets for getting a college degree as well as their academic intentions. The study population was 74 introductory psychology students, 23 male and 51 female, with the majority being first quarter freshmen at the start of the study. All students completed a questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the quarter which explored intent measures and satisfaction measures. Points accumulated from the course and enrollment data were tracked. In addition, two experimental groups participated in a training program designed to enhance retention. Results indicated that: (1) intent to get a degree in 4 years is negatively related to total points in class and is a predictor of attrition two quarters later; (2) first quarter freshmen had a decrease in perceived quality of academic life and a decrease in expected grade; (3) broad intent to get a degree is positively related to performance; and (4) intent to get a degree and satisfaction with life were negatively related to class performance. The retention training program did not affect retention two quarters later. The most frequent obstacles to student persistence were money, work, and study habits. The most common assets were good study habits, family and friends, and internal qualities such as intelligence and determination. Reliability and validity measures on other cognitive measures are presented. (19 references) (JB)

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INTENT TO GET A DEGREE, EXPECTATIONS, AND ATTITUDE CHANGE

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Abstract

Facets of intent to get a degree are measured at quarters' start and at quarters' end. Intent to get a degree in four years is negatively related to total points in class and is a predictor of attrition two quarters later. Use of realistic orientation previews may be a useful tool in reducing attrition. Reliability and validity measures on other cognitive measures are presented.

INTENT TO GET A DEGREE, EXPECTATIONS, AND ATTITUDE CHANGE

While factors facilitating student retention and factors hindering student attrition have been actively researched, more than 50 percent of the students who enter college still leave without receiving a degree (Tinto, 1975; Staats & Butler, 1990). The problems associated with getting a college degree continue to grow and to change as they are addressed. Changes include changes in the student population, changes in the student environment, changes in academic programs, and changes in our theoretical understanding of the relationships of positive and negative feelings.

The population of students has changed to include a larger proportion of older, non-traditional students who do not live on campus (Crimmins & Riddler, 1985). The college environment has changed to include a larger number of small, commuter colleges (Ross, 1989). A variety of curriculum changes are underway that tend to extend the time required for obtaining a college degree. And current theoreticians have re-discovered the wisdom of an early industrial psychologist, Herzberg (1968) who stated that satisfiers and dissatisfiers are different sorts of things (Bradburn, 1969, Diener & Emmons, 1985, Staats, 1983).

Contemporary research needs to respond to these changes. We need more data derived from two-year or commuter campuses. We need more data concerning cognitive and academic attitudes (in contrast

to the earlier, almost exclusive focus on social and demographic variables) and we need to address the positive as well as the negative forces in the acquisition of a college degree (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977 for a discussion of the role of intentions).

In particular, intent to get a degree, presented as a latent, unmeasured variable in major models of retention, is a variable meriting direct measurement (see Bean & Metzner, 1985 and Braxton, Duster, and Pascarella, 1988 for a review of this literature). Measures of satisfaction and perceived quality of academic life, and perceived assets as well as perceived obstacles are additional under-researched variables (Okun, Kardash, Stock, Sandler, & Baumann, 1986).

The present research focuses on cognitive rather than social attitudes, on satisfactions and perceived assets rather than dissatisfaction and obstacles, and in particular on facets of intent to get a college degree as well as a global measure of intent.

Method

Participants. Of the 92 introductory psychology students who agreed to be research participants, 74 finished and received a small amount of course credit for their participation. Twenty three were male and 51 were female. The average age of the students was 20.9 and the majority were first quarter freshmen at the start of the study.

Measures. All students completed a questionnaire packet at the beginning and at the end of the quarter. In addition to a cover

sheet, that requested demographic information, seven intent items were presented. These were: Intent to get a degree (a global measure), Intent to get a degree in four years or less, Intent to get a degree in six years, intent to get a degree at (current two-year institution), Intent to get a degree at the parent campus, Intent to get a degree at a different institution, and Intent to get a degree in the current major or college. Each of these intent items was measured on a 10 point response scale so that their variation could be measured in a more sensitive manner than that of a single global or Yes No item, used in some previous investigations (Johnson, 1987).

Other scales included a five item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985), a five item Satisfaction With School Scale (Staats & Partlo, 1990), Wish and Expect Scales of the Hope Index (Staats, 1989) and the Perceived Quality of Academic Life Scale (Please note that the Okun et al. Scale uses a seven point delighted to terrible scale with terrible receiving the high mark). The last page of the packet asked for a free response to three statements:

My goals for college are....

Obstacles or problems that make my goal attainment difficult are..

Assets that will help me attain my goal are.....

Finally, total number of points accumulated in the introductory psychology course (autumn quarter) was recorded for each student and arrangements were made to track the student's enrollment data

for the academic year.

Procedure. In addition to seeking reliability and validity information on the various attitudinal measures, we began work on constructing a training program to improve retention. On the basis of the subjects' response to 'Intent to get a degree' a median split was used to create a high and a low intent group. Subjects in the two constructed groups were then randomly assigned to either a training condition or to a control condition. The two control groups (one high in intent to get a degree and one low in intent to get a degree) simply filled out the questionnaire packet the first and the ninth week of the quarter. Persons in the two experimental groups (one high and one low in intent to get a degree) were given three training sessions or seminars covering topics such as time management, good study habits, self-esteem, goal-setting, and how to deal with hassles or small annoyances.

Finally, enrollment status was obtained for these students for the following two quarters.

Results

There were no significant changes in average intent measures from the first to the last week of the quarter (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

However, the students, primarily first quarter freshmen, did have a decrease in perceived quality of academic life (t_{dep} =5.31, p <.001), a decrease in expected grade (t_{dep}=7.70, p<.001), and a

decrease in satisfaction with school (t_{dep} =4.59, $p<.001$) at quarter's end. These changes may be influenced by final week exam anxiety as well as by disenchantment with their first exposure to the college experience. We will first look at these measures from a reliability and validity viewpoint, then from the viewpoint of attitude change, and finally in the context of unrealistic-expectations.

Since there have been few attempts to measure separate domains of intent, simple descriptive statistics are needed. Nine week test-retest reliability estimates are shown in Table 2. All measures yielded

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Insert Table 2 about here

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significant reliability estimates that ranged from a low of .31 for the broad measure of intent to get a degree to .81 for intent to get a degree in six years. Considering that one usually starts a task, for example getting a degree, with enthusiasm, and that this may wear thin after nine weeks have passed, several domains of intent to get a degree appear to be relatively stable.

Looking at this data from the viewpoint of attitude change, one would consider the broad measure of the intent to get a degree as the most variable or labile attitude, and therefore, potentially the most useful for predicting student behavior change.

Table 2 also presents two sets of validity estimates. The criterion measure used is the total number of points accumulated

over the quarter in the introductory psychology class (which is composed of scores on four tests, a final exam (about 30% of possible total points), and a small amount of extra credit). Correlations of the first week measures with the criterion are presented as predictive validity estimates and correlations of the ninth week measures with the criterion are presented as concurrent validity estimates. Five measures yielded significant concurrent validity estimates while only three yielded significant predictive validity estimates. Of the concurrent measures, Intent to get a degree in four years, and the Expect Scale of the Hope Index were negatively related to total points. We think that this is interpretable in the context of unrealistic expectations and of changing requirements for a degree. Many of the students on our campus are education majors and education has recently become a five year program. For a variety of reasons, including a recent campus-wide curriculum change, five years rather than four years is becoming the typical time required for obtaining a college degree. Data from industrial settings shows that unrealistic or inaccurate job previews are related to attrition and turnover (see Wanous, 1980 for a discussion of the importance of realistic job previews).

One may speculate that students who are less knowledgeable about the temporal requirements may also tend to be less knowledgeable about course requirements and perhaps have unrealistic underestimates of the time needed to complete study assignments. Such underestimates of study time would tend to lead

to poorer performance on examinations. In a similar vein, students with less commitment to getting a degree would be expected to react more negatively to the news that obtaining a degree will take longer than expected. An implication, drawn from results in industrial investigations, is that universities should engage in realistic recruitment rather than the traditional approach of extolling the institution's virtues

A possible interpretation of the negative relationship between satisfaction with life and academic performance is that dissatisfaction with life is a motivating force for changing one's life and a college degree may be an avenue toward that change. In other words, a person who is satisfied with their life now and the previous choices that they have made, may be less motivated to get a degree than the person who experiences considerable discrepancy between their life as it is and their life as it should be.

Future or predictive estimates are influenced by many more variables than are concurrent estimates and therefore the former estimates are usually smaller, which is the present case. Broad intent to get a degree is positively related to performance. Intent to get a degree at Newark (only education majors can do this now) and satisfaction with life were negative related to class performance. It is interesting to note that the least reliable (or the attitude most changeable) of the intent measures was the only measure positive related to final class performance. This suggests one should be careful about selecting intent to get a degree measures solely on the basis of reliability.

The goals listed by the students were content analyzed (Wadsworth and Ford, 1984). There was a decrease in the number of goals listed at the end of the quarter (X_2 =4.38, p<.05) and there was a decrease in the number of very broad goals (X^2= 9.32, p<.01). Significant changes were not obtained for other goal changes.

Since academic performance is related to retention, we wished to explore the relationship of the intent measures to number of points obtained in the psychology class. A stepwise multiple correlation procedure was used to predict total points in the introductory class from the seven intent measures. The seven variable model yielded and R^2 = .218. The significant variables were; intent to get a degree in four years (F=10.35, p = .002), intent to get a degree in present major (F=4.58, p= .035) and global intent to get a degree (F=3.44, p =.067).

Our training program was attractive to students during the autumn quarter but did not affect retention two quarters later. During the autumn quarter, four experimental subjects and 14 control subjects dropped out of the research program (x^2 =5.44, p <.05). Since the experimental subjects had to expend considerably more effort than did the control subjects to participate in the program, these differences are impressive. While in the class, the experimental subjects viewed the program as valuable and the control subjects apparently did not. However, when we looked at the subject population two quarters later there was no group differences in number of students retained. Eleven students had dropped out with five of them from the experimental group and six

from the control group.

Autumn quarter data from eleven dropout students was generally similar to the retained students for most measures including obstacles and assets. The most frequent obstacles for both groups were money, work, and study habits. The most common assets for both were good study habits, family and friends, and internal qualities such as intelligence and determination.

In order to see if membership in the dropout group could be predicted, a same sized group was randomly selected from those students who remained in college. A significant discriminant function was obtained (Chi Square = 14.19, $p \leq .001$). The retained predictors of retention status were expectations (from the Hope Index), satisfaction with school, points in the psychology class, and expected grade. The students who had dropped out by spring quarter showed differences in ninth week autumn in four areas: the dropouts had lower expectations in general as measured by the Hope Index, expected lower grades, achieved lower scores in the psychology class, but had shown less decrease in satisfaction with school when compared with a randomly chosen group of eleven retainees.

The maintained satisfaction with school of the dropout group is puzzling since those who remained in the system showed a decrease in satisfaction from week one to week nine of autumn quarter. A tentative, post hoc explanation is offered. Most students do not do as well in college than they anticipated. Most students have a decrease in satisfaction with school which may be

dissonance reducing and allows the student to place blame for failure externally, i.e. this course, this teacher, this institution is not so good. Another class of students, who are not doing well, do not have lowered satisfaction with school and this may favor their internal blame placing and produce a more dissonant set of cognitions. Persistence of these cognitions may lead to the students' withdrawal from the system.

Future research should include follow-up measurements of the students, a stronger intervention, i.e., more frequent training sessions, and a more objective measure of assets.

Notes:

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2. We wish to thank Associate Dean Paul Panek and his staff for providing enrollment data for students in the intervention program.

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TABLE 1

Means and Changes in Means Across the First Quarter of College

Measures	1st Week Mean	1st Week SD	9th Week Mean	9th Week SD	t diff
_Intent					
to get degree	9.27	1.02	9.36	1.13	-0.10
in 4 years	7.27	2.84	7.05	3.16	0.97
in 6 years	5.25	4.14	6.14	3.78	-1.11
at Newark OSU	3.14	3.79	3.70	3.84	-1.21
at Columbus OSU	6.87	3.46	7.28	3.28	-0.64
elsewhere	2.39	2.70	2.38	2.58	0.00
in present major	7.81	2.71	7.91	2.67	0.33
Global Intent	24.29	4.00	24.25	4.95	0.73
PQAL	14.62	3.82	16.89	4.66	-5.31***
Satis. School	30.91	3.68	27.55	6.20	4.59***
Satis. Life	23.73	5.77	23.36	6.84	1.64
Hope	245.38	48.42	244.14	47.95	1.04
Wish	73.87	6.22	74.20	5.04	0.16
Expect	52.55	9.18	52.22	9.60	0.80
Egrade	3.39	0.67	2.57	0.80	7.70***

* = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .01$ *** = $p < .001$

TABLE 2

Reliability, Validity, and Attitude Change

Measures	Reliability Measures 9-week Test-retest	Validity Measures Criterion = Total Points "Predictive"	"Concurrent"
Intent			
to get degree	.31 **	.23 *	.02
in 4 years	.66 ***	-.16	-.40 *
in 6 years	.82 ***	.04	.13
at Newark OSU	.58 ***	-.24 *	-.18
at Columbus OSU	.78 ***	.15	.10
elsewhere	.51 ***	.14	-.03
in present major	.54 ***	-.18	-.04
Global Intent	.53 ***	-.16	-.26 *
PQAL	.54 ***	-.09	-.21
Satis. School	.29 **	.12	.05
Satis. Life	.66 ***	-.26 *	-.33 **
Hope	.60 ***	-.14	-.32 *
Wish	.46 ***	-.07	-.05
Expect	.55 ***	-.14	-.33 **
Egrade	.36 **	.44 ***	.48 ***

* = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .01$ *** = $p < .001$